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Interview with Maria Martinez

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Maria Martinez (Photo: Scott Cook)

Maria Martinez and Wenxian Zhang Interview

May 31, 2017

WZ: Good morning.

MM: Good morning.

WZ: My name is Wenxian Zhang, I'm the Head of Archives and Special Collections. Today is May thirty-first. With me is Maria Martinez, Associate Vice President for Risk Management and Human Resources.

Maria, can you share with me your family background?

MM: My family background. Well, I came from Cuba. I was born and raised in Cuba, and I came to the United States in 1962 with the Peter Pan program, which was a program that brought over about fifteen thousand children from Cuba, and then dispersed them throughout the United States in foster care homes until the parents were able to come over in the United States from Cuba.

WZ: Yeah, I read this story from *Rollins 360*. Fascinating. It must be hard when you separate from your parents for five years. That must be a tough decision made by your parents.

MM: My parents are my heroes. Yeah, can you imagine what a tough decision that must have been for them? It was amazing that they had the courage, and to do something like that for the betterment of their children—that's really what it came down to. What was going around [in Cuba] was that they were going to take the children from the parents and send them to a camp and even to Russia at the time for studying and training and things of that nature. And my parents, and all the other parents who sent their children here, just felt that that was just not what they wanted. And they wanted to have their children be free, in essence, in a country that can provide religious freedom and all kinds of freedoms. So that's why they made that decision, which was a tough decision for them to make. *Very* difficult decision.

WZ: So, your parents are not members of—

MM: Of the Communist Party? No, (laughs) far from it. Very far from it, yeah.

WZ: You came with your older sisters?

MM: I came with two sisters: my middle sister and my older sister. I was ten, and my sisters were twelve and fourteen. So my fourteen-year-old sister really became the mother for us. And one of the things that my parents had told her—they had heard that when the children came here that they were being separated as brothers and sisters and put into different places and different states. And one of the things my mother had said to my older sister [was], “Do not separate, do not separate.” And we never did get separated. She insisted that wherever we go, we go the three of us, or we don't go at all. So, at the age of fourteen, she became the responsible individual, to take care of two sisters. So, tough for her, too.

WZ: So you settled in the Philadelphia area?

MM: We settled in Easton, Pennsylvania, which is about an hour from Philadelphia. We started out in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, and then moved to Easton. And we pretty much stayed there until my parents moved—retired, and moved down to Boca Raton. And I came down here later on.

WZ: So when you graduated from high school in Pennsylvania, you attended Allentown?

MM: I attended Allentown College of Saint Francis de Sales, which is now called DeSales University. It's a small, liberal arts, Catholic institution, right there in the Saucon Valley area.

WZ: When I look at your resume, you have an interesting experience working undercover for the Liquor Control Board. Tell me about that.

MM: (laughs) Well, when I graduated in 1974 from college, there was a period of time that there were not too many jobs available in the marketplace at that time. And I came across some people that I knew that worked in the Liquor Control Board, and they said that they were in the process of putting together a training group made up of females, because the Liquor Control Board undercover agents were all males. There were no females in the group whatsoever. So this whole new class was going to be made up of females [and] minorities: African Americans, Hispanics, women, et cetera. So I was told, Go and get the training, and if you don't feel like this is something that you really want to do, then at least you got training. So I said, “Okay, I'll give it a try.” So I did.

And it was fascinating—it was pretty much a lot of police work—and [I] became a Liquor Control agent undercover. Which really meant that you go into the bars, and you become a patron—an undercover patron, so you have to act like a patron in the bar to look for violations of the law. Some of the violations were underage drinking in the bars, which was a big one; clubs who only permitted—in Pennsylvania, you have a lot of VFWs and these kinds of clubs, that are pretty much clubs that were for men, frankly. And they were not permitted to serve anyone that wasn't a member of the club. So what was happening was that they were permitting a lot of women to go into the club and serve them. So that was a violation. After-hours openings of the bars, et cetera. So those were the kinds of violations that a lot of times, that's what we were there for.

WZ: Is that the time when the legal drink[ing] age was changed?

MM: Pennsylvania has always been twenty-one years of age. It was never eighteen, I don't believe. No, no—Pennsylvania never, never went to eighteen. New York was eighteen years of age at the time. But Pennsylvania has always been twenty-one years of age. Never changed.

The legal change across the entire country—I think that was about ten years ago. And that had to do with the federal government saying that they would not be providing financial assistance to states—federal assistance for states—if they continued to have drinking age below twenty-one years of age or something to that effect. It was a law that passed, and of course every state decided at that point they needed to change the law to twenty-one.

WZ: So that sounded like a very interesting job. So what made you decide to change your career?

MM: Well, it is a very interesting job; but it was a very taxing job, because you were actually working nights, drinking a lot—which was not very good for your health—and as a result of that, I then started working in the licensing department for a very short period of time. And then within the same agency, the executive director of the board of the agency contacted me and asked me if I wished to become the Director of Affirmative Action. Which was very interesting. I really didn't know much about what that entailed, but it was again one of these things that we discussed and said, You know, give me six months and see if I do it, and if I can't do it, then I'll just go back to the licensing bureau.

So I came into the job, and at that time is when affirmative action really was starting to become known in the country. And I again found that it was a very good, interesting job. My plan for affirmative action became the model plan for the State of Pennsylvania, which was a very nice thing to have. So, that's how I started changing my career at that point.

You know, my career kind of happened—how can I say this?—with the help of others. It is just amazing that my entire career went like that throughout the years. People that believed in me and people that felt that I could do a job, and they gave me the opportunity. So from there, a job became available at Lehigh University, in the employment division of human resources. And I thought, Well, that's right in line with affirmative action, because of the hiring processes and things of that nature. So I applied for that job, and lo and behold, they accepted me, and I was at

Lehigh University for ten years in the Human Resources Department. So that kind of changed my whole entire career over again. And once I fell into human resources, I felt that that was definitely the career that I always wanted to be in.

WZ: Well, later you also received your master's degree.

MM: Yes, I did. Yes. They had the same kind of program as they do here, you know—free tuition, which is wonderful. And I did get my master's degree in human development there.

WZ: So you have a very established career at Lehigh, which is a well-respected institution of higher learning. What made you decide to come to Rollins?

MM: Well, I got my master's degree and I was the employment manager at the time. When I got my master's degree, I felt that at this point in my life I'd been there ten years, and I wanted to be more involved in human resources. I really wanted to become a director—either associate director or a director of the department.

So I started interviewing across the country, and this job became available through *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and I thought, Whoa. And it was really interesting, because my parents had moved the year before to Boca Raton and retired there with the whole entire family. So they had just all moved down here and this job became available. And I thought, Whoa, this seems to be written for me. So I applied, and Bob Bowie, who was the Vice President and Treasurer at the time, was the one that interviewed me. And I got the job.

So I was thrilled to be able to move to Florida, especially since my whole family had moved down here. And our family is extremely close, so it was really good that we were again reunited.

WZ: So what is your first impression of Rollins when you arrived on campus?

MM: Oh, my goodness, when I arrived on campus. My first impression was (laughs) golf carts. And sprinkler systems. (laughs) You had to dodge the sprinkler systems. Seeing golf carts on campus was like, Whoa, what *is* this? Coming from a Northeast college, you don't see those things that often, so that was just kind of interesting.

I thought it was a beautiful campus, even back then. In thirty years, it's even much more beautiful now than it was back then. But I love the Mediterranean look. I love the foliage, the plants, the lake—what's not to love about this place? And the people that I met were just so friendly, warm, kind, that I just thought, Wow, this is just a really good environment for me to be working in.



Maria Martinez, 1988 (Photo: Rollins College Archives)

WZ: So who are some of the people that left an impression on you?

MM: That left an impression on me? You mean here at Rollins? Well, Thad Seymour, for one. He was president when I was hired, and I'll never forget him giving out silver dollars if you did a good deed. That was just great. He was just a wonderful individual, who really cared about students, and cared about staff as well, which was very important for me. He actually let me do the things that I needed to do to make the HR department here at Rollins what it needed to be. So he pretty much gave me a blank slate to say, Do what you need to do. So that was very, very helpful for me, because we did need to do a lot of changes and a lot of things in the HR department, so that made an incredible impression.

Rita Bornstein, she came after, and she is pretty much what I would say was the person who actually elevated Human Resources to the level that it needs to be in an organization. A lot of times, HR has been looked at as more transactional than strategic. And I believe that Rita, in the course of her being here and working with us, recognized the need and the importance of having a human resource department at an institution that is a strategic partner. So I think that she really helped us tremendously to become that strategic partner at the institution.

Those two individuals I put at the top of my list as far as who provided me with guidance as well as mentoring, and really brought my career into the fold as well.

WZ: So, I believe it was during Rita's administration that you were named VP for Risk Management, is that correct?

MM: No, no. I was named Associate Vice President for Risk Management about seven years ago, under Jeff Eisenbarth. I *took over* risk management under George Herbst. George was in charge of the insurances for the college: property, and liability, and the various vehicle insurances. So he negotiated all of the contracts for the college, et cetera. And I think there was a point in time where he realized, You do all the insurances for the college, as far as health insurance and life insurance and everything. So what's the difference? And he said, "Here, you do it." So that's where I started that whole area.

So, I don't do anything halfway. I do everything full; if not, I can't do it. So, when I found out what risk management is—risk management is not *just* about insurance. And I really started getting into it: I went to conferences, I read a lot, did a lot of research on what risk management is really all about. And we really did not really have a risk management here at the college at all, other than buying insurances. So I started the whole process of educating the institution about what risk management is all about.

And I think things that happened in the world, like Penn State's situation with Jerry Sandusky, with the murders of the students in Virginia Tech—all of these things were becoming so alive in the country that many conferences were all talking about risk. So that helped me tremendously in educating our community about what risk is about and how do we mitigate that risk.

So, as a result of that, we put in several programs. Sometimes it's bureaucratic, but it is what it is—it's a very litigious society, so you need to protect yourself and protect the institution from any kind of legal lawsuits. So we started doing waivers, you know, for waiving your rights to suing us if anything happens to you, in a sense. So depending upon what the programs are, we do have a lot of waivers. We do background checks now, so volunteers that come on campus also do the background checks. So we go around looking at what are the potential risks that an institution could actually have.

And just recently we went into what they called enterprise risk management, which is really the whole institution risk management aspect of things. So we developed a committee, made up of five individuals. And the Board of Trustees also developed a committee of enterprise risk management. So one of our charges right now is to go around to determine what are the highest levels of risk that we have, and then analyze those risks, and then determine what is it that we're doing to mitigate those risks, and what is it we that can do better to mitigate those risks. So those are the kinds of things that we're doing right now. And this committee actually meets every Wednesday afternoon for about an hour and a half, and we choose different areas of the college to thoroughly review their whole entire program to see where the risks are, how do we mitigate those risks, and what can we do to make it better.

So, we've done, for instance, Title IX; we've done student organizations; we've done the museum; and we just continue down the line. And then we report to the President, Grant [Cornwell], and tell him what we did, and then we go to the Board of Trustees' committee on a conference call and relate that. And then what happens from there is that those departments need to provide us reports as to what the recommendations were and how have they implemented the recommendations going forward.

So it is a really interesting process. It has really helped us understand more aspects of the institution, as well as the departments themselves are getting an outside view of what potential risks there could be. So they have found it a very interesting process themselves.

WZ: Most people probably do not realize the amount of work involved behind the scenes.

MM: Absolutely, and that's only risk management. Then you get the human resources part of it that we deal with on an everyday basis.

WZ: Tell me about your HR part of work.

MM: (pauses; laughs) HR is its own world. We deal with all faculty and staff and student employment. We process all their—I mean, as far as payroll is concerned, for student employment. But we develop benefits programs; training programs. We have worker's compensation programs; we have—you know, Matt [Hawks] developed the service excellence programs. Recognition programs; awards programs; discipline issues, which are the toughest ones to deal with. Performance appraisals management; employment matters—hiring, terminating, promotions. So all of those are an entire part of what HR does.



*Maria Martinez (front row, center) and the Service Excellence Team, 2010
(Photo: Jennifer Ritter)*

Every day is a different day. I can't predict what's going to happen today. So that's what makes the world so interesting. You come in in the morning and something may happen at the college

with an employee, or faculty, or whatever, which you need to stop everything and deal with it at that point. Our department is a very service-oriented department, and this is the way it *needs* to be. We're here for servicing our faculty, staff, and students, as well as the public. So, we pretty much are there to provide whatever assistance is necessary for them to do their work.

We deal with all legal cases. I deal with all the legal cases for the college. We don't have an attorney on campus, but we do have a retainer. So I work with the insurance company from a liability perspective—United Educators. And then I also work with our attorney, so when we have a lawsuit, I am the college representative for that particular lawsuit. So anything that has to do with depositions, or gathering the data, you know—maybe even having to go to court—I'm involved in all of that at that point.

WZ: Yeah, I just cannot imagine the amount of stress involved. So, what are some of the challenges you think you can share?

MM: What challenges do we have? You know, it's kind of interesting. I don't look at things as challenges; I look at things as opportunities. So everything that occurs is an opportunity for us to make it better or to do something better. Even when it comes to employee discipline or issues; we work with supervisors to work with the employee. The last resort is of course terminating an employee, and that's the worst thing that could happen. That, I think, is the most wrenching part of human resources. But we work with the supervisors, and the supervisor can work with the employee to develop that employee to behave or perform better. So we're doing that all the time.

Regulations are always coming down the road. There's a constant flow of government regulations that we constantly have to be aware of and constantly have to be keeping up with. So that's a real challenge for us. You know—with the whole health insurance issue. So what happens when those regulations come in, that's [in] addition to what we're already doing. So it's not like we can say, Okay, we're going to hire somebody to do this. No, we have to consume all of that. So that's a real challenge sometimes.

(pauses) Not enough time in the day to do everything you need to do. (laughs) It's a challenge. The staff really works hard; they work sometimes 'til six-seven o'clock at nighttime. And it can become very stressful, because if you've got projects to do and everyday work to do, and then something happens and you have to stop everything—this interruptions kind of thing. But it is what it is, and you just keep on doing it.

WZ: So Rollins has been recognized as one of the best employers in the region and also by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. So, if you can highlight some of the professional accomplishments under your leadership.

MM: Well, when I first came to Rollins, there really was not an HR department. There were a couple of people that really did transaction—you know, here is the paperwork, put this employee on payroll, here's the benefits, and that's it.

The benefits were very, very poor when I first came to Rollins. (laughs) I must say that it was really—it was a kind of a benefits where the staff would get different kind of benefits; or not so much different kind of benefits, but requirements such as waiting periods and things of that

nature were higher for staff than it was for faculty. So there was inequality going on in the benefits arena.

The pension plan was—horrible, I must say. What it was at that time was the college was providing 6 percent, *if you put in 6 percent*; so for every dollar you put in, the college would match it, up to 6 percent of your salary. Well, needless to say, what was happening there was that is what they would call a discriminatory plan, because the only ones that were taking the plan was the highly compensated employees, and the lower employees didn't have anything. So that we had to change immediately. So when we started looking at it, saying, Well, how competitive do we need to be? So we did studies with other colleges to determine what they were providing to their faculty and staff, and we found that we were very, very low. So we started a program where we started with 6 percent, but three was given by the college and three was matching. So at least people that couldn't afford to put money in, they could at least get 3 percent of their salary. And then from there we just started increasing and increasing and increasing it to the point where now, as of January of this year, the college is going to be providing 7 percent, [with] no matching; and then above that is 4½ percent [with] matching; so that comes up to a total of 16 percent. And that's a strategic decision that we made.

In the past several years, we have a retirement investment committee. Again, new regulations came down and basically said that we had to become fiduciary of our pension plans. So, we have a committee set up of faculty and staff, and we have looked at our plan to determine where we need to be. And as a result we also changed companies; reduced the number of investments, which is required by government. So, from that perspective that pension plan just became really very important.

And like that, there were a lot of different things that were not happening at the college. Again, all the benefits. Life insurance was different for staff than faculty, so I equalized all of that. We put in a paid time off program. We put in employee assistance programs. We put wellness programs in.

We also joined ICUBA. I was involved in creating the ICUBA program, which is an association of colleges and K-12 private institutions, where we now buy health insurance as a group, which has more marketing value. You know, fourteen thousand lives versus seven hundred lives—you can get much more benefit for the money that you're putting out. So we started that program many, many years ago, and it has been very, very, very good. We've only had in the past years an average of about 4- or 5 percent increase in premiums, whereas many other places, it's 12-13 percent. So, that was a very, very good change that we did there.

So, we put in policies, we put in procedures. One of the areas that I was very concerned about, we were in the administration building, in the top floor, right by the bursar's office, and we had the rooms in the back, and there was no confidentiality. There was no privacy whatsoever. And of one the things that I said was, "We can't continue to be here, because human resources *is* a confidential and private matter." And employees would come by, and everybody would say, Oh, who's going to HR; why are they going to HR? So it was kind of like, no, we don't need to be here. So that's when they put us in the basement. And you know, granted the basement is not the

best place to be, but it was confidential, it was private, and people felt okay coming in there. They didn't feel threatened, they didn't feel intimidated, or anybody seeing them coming in. So we established the HR Department down in the basement of Warren Administration, and then of course we moved to Carnegie later on.

But yes, we developed a lot of policies; there weren't any here. A lot of procedures. New benefits. Started training programs. We developed the department in the way that a human resources department needs to run an organization. A professional program.

WZ: Yes, I remember, when I first came here in '95, my meeting with HR was in the basement of the Warren building.

MM: Right. (laughs)

WZ: So Carnegie is definitely a much better option.

MM: Yes, oh absolutely. There's no doubt about it.

I came in 1988. Actually, I came on February twenty-ninth. Just to show you—I was supposed to start March first of 1988, that was my date to start. But I was in town, and I came in on February twenty-ninth. And the staff there insisted that I be put on the payroll on the twenty-ninth because that's when I started working. And I said, "No, just put me on for March first because you don't want a leap year situation." No, they put me on February twenty-ninth. So in essence, I've only been at the college for—how many leap years have we had since 1988? Five? So I've only been here five years. (laughs) According to my records. (laughs)

WZ: So, twenty-nine years total.

MM: Right, right.

WZ: So, almost thirty years, by next year.

MM: Next February will be thirty years.

WZ: That's a major milestone in anybody's life.

MM: Yes, it sure is. Thirty years. I never thought—when I got hired with Bob Bowie, I remember coming to him, and I said, "Okay, I'm going to give you five years. I'll develop this program, I'll run the HR Department, and I'll make it the way it needs to be and then I'm going to be leaving." Here I am, thirty years later. I'm *still* here. (laughs)

WZ: Now looking back at your Rollins career, how do you view it?

MM: Oh, I think it has been the best thing that has happened to me in my career. I was given the opportunity here to develop, to create; to be free to be able to do the things that need to be done. I was highly trusted by the administration, which I think is very important in order to do things at Rollins—and, well, in any place. So I felt that my career blossomed here because of the freedom that I had to do the things that needed to be done. So I think it's been a great career. It's been a great institution to work for. Miss a lot of the people here. (pauses; laughs) Yeah, it's been a great institution.

I've had many opportunities in the past thirty years. Recruiters have called and said—you know, Here, there, and everywhere. And I said, "Why? Why do I need to leave?" I remember one in Chicago called. And I said, "Do you know where you're calling? I'm in Florida. Why would I want to move to Chicago?" *Cold*. So yeah, I've had many opportunities, but I just felt that there was never a need for me to leave Florida, especially with my family here as well. I love Florida. I love the college, and there's no need for me to move.

WZ: So are your sisters still in Florida?

MM: My sisters live in Boca Raton. So both of them are there. They're both retired now. And my niece and her husband and two children live in Boca as well. So—small family, but very close family.

WZ: This article from *Rollins 360* mentioned you never visited Cuba.

MM: Nope. Not after I left, no.

WZ: So, still no plan to?

MM: It's. . . my sister and I have talked about it a lot, and there's mixed emotions there about visiting Cuba. She says things like, "If I go back to Cuba, the only way I want to go back is as a tourist," and what that means basically is that she doesn't want to go back. She doesn't want to go back to where we lived. (cries) And partly the reason is because it's destroyed. People are living in poverty, *real* poverty. And my parents always said, "Remember Cuba the way it used to be." Now under Batista, it was not a *great* place to live, but as a child you remember it as you used to remember it as a child. And yes, I have seen pictures of where we lived, and it's sad. So yes, there's lots of mixed feelings.

WZ: So, what is the plan after retirement?

MM: Well, one of the things that I used to do in Pennsylvania was, I was involved in a lot of community programs. And one of the things I have not done here has been involved in community affairs, because my life really has been a lot about Rollins and creating what we need to do here, and time has been difficult.

But a year and a half, two years ago, I got involved with the Mustard Seed, and I've been working with them. So I'm going to do a lot of charity work. Whether on boards or whether just getting my hands right into helping them out—whatever it is that I need to do.

I want to travel. I love to travel and I want to do a lot of travelling in the United States, visit friends that I haven't seen in a long, long time.

Being able to not have an alarm on in the morning when I wake up. Just wake up naturally. (laughs) So those are the kinds of things that I want to do.

WZ: Sounds fun. Earlier you mentioned Thad and Rita, during your thirty years working for four administrations.

MM: I have.

WZ: What is your view of them?

MM: Every one of them has been different. They're four different administrations and every one of them had its ups and downs. Every one of them has had *great* accomplishments, in one way or another. So it's really hard to say this one is better than this one, and I would never say that, because again, I think everyone is different.

And in many ways, they're the same. One of the things they're the same about is that they love Rollins and they want to make Rollins the best that there is across the entire country. So they do things with the purpose of making Rollins the best small college in the country.

So, I'm very resilient. I'm very flexible. I think that's why I've survived four different administrations. I have never been asked to do anything illegal/immoral, so therefore the things I have been asked to do have been for the good of the institution, and I have absolutely no problems with that whatsoever.

WZ: Recently, you've been recognized as one of the most inspiring women at Rollins. That's very impressive. And also you're named [one of the] Top 25 Influential Hispanics in Central Florida. I think you are one of the earliest Hispanic leaders at Rollins. Do you know if before you there were any other top administrators at Rollins of Hispanic heritage?

MM: Prior to me?

WZ: Yeah. So I wonder; you're probably the trailblazer.

MM: Well, yeah. I think I am. I would say so. I think that I was the first Hispanic woman—I mean, Udeth Lugo has been here for a long, long time, and I think he has done tremendous things at the institution. But I think I am the first Hispanic woman that was hired in a directorship position and become a leader at the institution.

So yeah, you want to call me a trailblazer? I was a trailblazer in many places. I was a trailblazer when I went to college, because it was the first year of co-eds. So, that was an all-male institution and here comes the forty-five women. So I was a trailblazer there. I was a trailblazer when I got hired at the Liquor Control Board, because there were no women there. So my whole life has been like, breaking that barrier in a sense of male-dominated societies, as well as, you know, breaking the barrier for Hispanics. So yeah, I guess if you want to call me that, that's great. (laughs)

One of the things that I did do a lot here—I mean, you asked me about community service and I didn't do that here, but I was very much involved in my association, which is the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources. And that's a national association, and I was on the board there. I was the regional chair for two years in a row. I was involved in many different positions: treasurer, secretary, all of the various different levels that you are in. I was on the national board for three years. And that really provided me with a lot of professional development and a lot of skills, because when you are the chair of a region, you are responsible—we were totally responsible back then for creating a conference for the entire region, and the skills that you learn there—negotiating contracts, developing programs, what

food to eat, and what activities are we going to have. So it was really developing the whole entire conference. So there were seven of us on the board at the time and it was a great experience that I had. And I did that for seven years. It was really a great experience. And it brought a lot of name recognition for Rollins as well.

WZ: That's wonderful. Anything else you would like to share with me?

MM: No. I'm going to miss this place. I must say, after thirty years of being in an institution—it's a wonderful place, and I'm going to miss it.

WZ: Well, thank you so much, Maria. I have really enjoyed talking with you, and thank you for all your professional contributions to Rollins over the last thirty years.

MM: Thank you. It was enjoyable.